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REMARKS

—OF—

HON. WILLIAM SPRAGUE,

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES,

JANUARY 9th, 1872,

ON THE PRESENTATION OF THE

STATUE OF ROGER WILLIAMS.



STATUE OF ROGER WILLIAMS.

Remarks of Hon. William Sprague,

— UPON THE —

PRESENTATION OF THE STATUE OF ROGER WILLIAMS, BY
THE STATE OF RHODE ISLAND, TO THE PEOPLE OF
THE UNITED STATES, DELIVERED IN THE SENATE,
JANUARY 9TH, 1872.

MR. PRESIDENT: I formally present, in the name and in behalf of the State of Rhode Island, a memorial statue of its founder, to the people of the United States, to be preserved in the national Capital, with the statues of those other worthies whose services and merits, in the judgment of their grateful descendants, entitle them to this preëminent honor.

It is less to be regretted that the artist, who has created so striking an ideal conception of Roger Williams, had no authentic source from which he could reproduce the likeness of the man, since the name of Roger Williams is rather identified with the living ideas of which he was the exponent, than with any mere individualities of form and feature.

Two centuries and a half have almost elapsed since the General Court of the Plymouth Colony expressed the intolerant bigotry of a political clergy by pronouncing sentence of banishment upon Roger Williams. His chief offence was a denial that the civil power extended to matters of faith and conscience: and for this he was driven beyond the pale of what was then, in New England, the abode of religion and civilization.

After experiencing the privations of a bitter winter in a wilderness among savages he landed, after a second warning from his persecutors, with a handful of devoted friends, upon the western shore of the Seekonk, in the early summer of 1636. From this beginning sprang the now proud and prosperous city of Providence.

But it is not because he was the founder of a city, nor because he planted a colony, from the loins of which has sprung a vigorous State, that Rhode Island has resolved to set up his statue in the Capitol of the nation; but she has accorded him this honor because he successfully vindicated the right of private judgment in matters of conscience, and effected a moral and political revolution in all the governments of the civilized world.

The doctrine of absolute separation between Church and State is so universally recognized by the men of this generation, as a cardinal necessity to the existence of a free and healthy Government, and appears to us

to be such an evident political axiom, that it requires an effort to suppose that it was not a principle of political philosophy from the earliest settlement of this country. It was not so. The Puritans of New England were willing to suffer to the last extremity for conscience sake, but they were in no sense martyrs to liberty of conscience, and were as intolerant of heresy to their belief as the Conformists of England, or the Church of Rome. The Puritans brought with them the best results of the Reformation which had agitated Europe from the time of Wickliffe to Luther, but as a body they had no conception of the idea that in matters of faith the conscience of the man, and not the law of the State, was supreme. The merit of Williams in announcing and maintaining this, then strange and heretical doctrine, is therefore to be estimated with reference to the adverse tendencies and opinions of the period. He alone brought the great work of the Reformation to its last grand stage of development.

It is a mistaken idea that violent revolutions are the only crises which determine the fortunes of a people. There are other influences less startling, but not less important, more gradual in their culmination, but not less certain, which modify and shape by their silent but ceaseless power, the destiny not merely of a single people, but of a whole race. When we contemplate, as with just pride we may, the boundless resources of our common country, and realize that with each succeeding year we are giving strength and permanency

to that lively experiment in self government which for less than a century has been nursed on this continent, we may well gratefully inquire how much of this great progress and political triumph is due to the spread and adoption of that idea, which, in weakness and in discouragement, was first resolutely exhibited in a scheme of self government by a single master-spirit, in 1636. on the hills of Providence.

It was a happy thought, which suggested that the several States should contribute to form a national gallery of the statues of the men who have been most prominent in their history. Rhode Island would have been untrue to her antecedents, had she failed to name her first citizen for this dignity. She presents, in prompt response to the opportunity, this memorial in marble, for the contemplation of those who resort hither to witness the best development of a Republican Government, and in grateful acknowledgement of the services which, not to her alone, but to the whole world, have been rendered by Roger Williams.

The following resolutions were adopted :


Resolved by the Senate (the House of Representatives concurring) that the thanks of Congress be presented to the Governor, and through him to the people of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations for the statue of Roger Williams, whose name is so honorably identified with our colonial history.

Resolved, That this work of art is accepted in the name of the nation, and assigned a place in the old Hall of the House of Representatives, already set aside by act of Congress for statues of eminent citizens, and that a copy of this resolution, signed by the President of the Senate, and the Speaker of the House of Representatives, be transmitted to the Governor of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations.

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